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Bible Riots:

When Christians Killed Each Other Over Religion in Public Schools

By Rob Boston

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On a warm spring day more than 150 years ago George Schiffler died on a street in Philadelphia. Though history didn't record much about the 18-year-old, except that he was a "leather worker," it does tell a great deal about the circumstances surrounding his death. Young Schiffler was the first to die as rampaging mobs of Roman Catholics and Protestants shot, clubbed, and otherwise attacked one another in what was known as the "Philadelphia Bible Riots."

Interestingly enough, the issue that incited the violence remains controversial even today, and that is religion in public schools.

In fact, the parallels between the rhetoric of nineteenth-century America's Protestant majority and today's Religious Right are startling. As Roman Catholics and Protestants battled more than a century ago over prayer and Bible reading in public schools, Protestants relied on the same arguments uttered by modern-day TV preachers: Protestant practices in public schools were "traditional"; those who don't like the exercises could get up and leave the room; a little religion never hurt anyone; and finally, Protestants were the majority and should have the right to do whatever they wanted.

Like the modern Religious Right, ultraconservative Protestant leaders of the nineteenth century insisted the United States was a "Christian nation." Only one catch: by "Christian" they really meant "Protestant."

Statistically at least, the view was correct. Although Roman Catholics had lived in the country since the Colonial period, they were few in number and politically impotent. A great wave of immigration from Ireland in the 1830's and 1840's threatened to change that. Most of the Irish were Catholics fleeing the potato famine, and their arrival on these shores in large numbers caused near panic among the Protestant majority.

Catholics were considered a threat; they resisted assimilation and were accused of owing their loyalty to a foreign potentate - the Roman pope. Their religion was widely misunderstood, and rumors circulated. Priests were accused of sexual depravity. Priests and nuns, it was said, had engaged in illicit affairs and killed the offspring, burying them beneath the floors of convents. As bizarre as these stories sound today,

they were taken seriously by many Americans in the 1840's.

Each side had extremes. In 1842 more than 50 clergy formed the American Protestant Association, a group dedicated to halting the spread of Catholicism in the United States.

The Catholic Church, meanwhile, dogmatically clung to theological precepts that only widened the chasm between the two groups. The church's official stance was that separation of church and state was an erroneous principle; governments, the church maintained, had an obligation to submit to Rome. There was no salvation outside the church, and "error" - that is, other religions - had no rights that the pope was obliged to recognize.

In 1843, just a year before the riots, a wave of Protestant fervor swept Philadelphia. Church leaders joined forces to bring the community back to God, which included restoring a sense of the sacred to Sunday. Philadelphia clergy joined a burgeoning national movement to suspend Sunday train travel and stop mail delivery. Philadelphia clergy also launched a special campaign to halt Sunday liquor sales.

Against this backdrop tensions over religious activity in the city's public schools rose. Pennsylvania's public schools reflected generic Protestantism. The school day began with the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, readings from the King James Version of the Bible, and often group singing of Protestant hymns. In addition, the Bible was frequently used as a textbook in spelling classes and to teach other secular subjects.

Bible reading occurred "without comment." The teacher simply read a set number of verses - usually 10 - without elaborating or interpreting them. Most Protestant groups found the practice acceptable, because it echoed their own theology. But Catholics - who look to church leaders to interpret the Scripture - considered the practice alien and heretical.

As the Catholic population increased, the Protestant majority decided to draw a line in the sand at the public school door. In 1838 the state legislature passed a law mandating that the Bible - and by that everyone knew they meant the King James Version - be used as a public school textbook. The new law was a deliberate slap in the face to Catholics, because it was unnecessary: public schools all over the state were already relying on the King James Bible for daily instruction.

Also, some textbooks had a clear anti-Catholic bias. One even referred to the pope as the anti-Christ. Catholic clergy finally began planning a protest.

In 1842 Philadelphia bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick launched his first salvo. He approached the Board of School Controllers to ask that the blatantly anti-Catholic books be removed. Kenrick also requested that Catholic students be permitted to use their own Bibles - the Douay version - during morning devotionals.

In response the board passed a directive instructing schools not to use books with religious content without the express permission of the board. Designed to placate Kenrick, the directive was never enforced and was widely ignored. The board apparently did not act on the bishop's request concerning Douay Bibles, either.

Frustrated, Kenrick waited before trying again. This time he issued a statement asserting, "It is not consistent with the laws and the discipline of the Catholic Church for her members to unite in religious exercises with those who are not of their communion."

Perhaps hoping to allay problems, the board passed a resolution declaring that "no child be required to

attend or unite in the reading of the Bible in the public schools whose parents are conscientiously opposed thereto." Under the board's plan, Catholic students could leave the room before morning devotionals.

Kenrick would have preferred that the devotionals be done away with, but was smart enough not to say so publicly. He accepted the board's compromise. Philadelphia's Protestant clergy, however, had other ideas. Reaction to the board vote was swift, strong, and roundly unfavorable. Many Protestants interpreted the vote as the first step toward removing religious exercises from public schools. The plan to excuse Catholic students, they claimed, was part of a Vatican plot to disrupt the religious exercises so they would have no value, and the Catholic Church would take over the schools.

At that time the most virulent anti-Catholics were called nativists. A leading Philadelphia Nativist newspaper, the North American, editorialized: "For years and years the schools have been in operation, planned by Protestants, and almost wholly supported by Protestants, and now come the 'Bishop of New York' and the 'Bishop of Philadelphia' to interfere in the management of them, creating confusion within their walls and excitement without."

The American Protestant Association was soon circulating a scurrilous pamphlet attacking Kenrick and the board compromise. In such a volatile situation it was only a matter of time before something would set both sides off

In late February of 1844 a rumor started that a school director in the heavily Catholic north Philadelphia suburb of Kensington had ordered a teacher to suspend Bible readings. In reality the director, Hugh Clark, had merely suggested a temporary suspension of the devotionals to a principal who complained that allowing Catholic children to leave every morning was disruptive. In Clark's view the religious exercises could be resumed once a plan was worked out that allowed the Catholic students to leave peacefully. Furthermore, Clark had only suggested the plan; the final decision was the principal's.

But the details of the incident were lost in the rumor mill. Another school director, Henry Moore, a strident evangelical Protestant, began whipping up hysteria. A series of rallies were quickly organized to "save the Bible." One held March 13 attracted a crowd of 3,000.

As so often happens during disputes over religion in public schools, politicians were eager to cash in for whatever gain they could get. Pennsylvania's leading anti-Catholic political unit, the American Republican Party (ARP), quickly added a plank to its platform reading, "Resolved, that the Bible, without note or comment, is not sectarian - that it is the fountainhead of all morality and all good government, and should be used in our public schools as a reading book." Most "Save the Bible" rallies were organized by the ARP.

Hoping to build momentum, party leaders announced they would begin organizing across Philadelphia, even in heavily Irish areas such as Kensington's Third Ward. On April 27 a group of Irish disrupted a party meeting at a private home. Angry ARP officials announced a mass rally for Ward 3 on May 3.

During the afternoon of May 3, a Friday, Catholic Ward 3 residents watched ARP members erect a platform near a local school. By the 3:00 p.m. kickoff time, only about 100 ARP supporters had showed up, their ranks more than doubled by crowds of Irish - mostly young unemployed men - hanging around the neighborhood.

Although the situation was tense, ARP officials decided to proceed. A party leader had barely opened his mouth before gangs of Irish men stormed the stage and began pulling it down. Party officials fled to safety,

regrouping in a nearby Protestant neighborhood. Over the weekend they circulated flyers calling on ARP supporters to rally to defend their rights.

The following Monday, May 6, about 3,000 people - mostly men - showed up in Ward 3.

One of the first speakers was Lewis Levin. A shadowy figure, Levin was a Jew who might possibly have converted to Protestantism; the record is unclear. During his fiery talk, a downpour erupted. The crowd scattered, taking refuge in a large Irish marketplace. Levin tried to continue speaking in the marketplace, but Irish in the crowd heckled him.

Soon a shoving match broke out between a young Irish man and an ARP supporter. Crowds gathered around both men. One Protestant man produced a pistol. A Catholic dared him to fire, and he did. Someone else fired back, and a melee ensued. Soon rocks, clubs, and more pistols appeared.

A Catholic named Patrick Fisher, who tried to stop the fight, was shot in the face. Catholics poured out of nearby homes along Cadwalader Street and joined the fray. Other Catholics began shooting at Protestants from their homes. With no cover, Protestants started dropping. The first to be hit was George Schiffler, who died soon after. Three others also went down. Joseph Cox was seriously wounded and died three weeks later. Two others - Henry Temper and Thomas Ford - received less serious wounds. The Philadelphia Bible Riots had begun.

As soon as the fighting began, some Protestants fled the area, looking for reinforcements. They rounded up 18 armed men, who marched up Cadwalader Street, stoning houses and breaking doors and windows.

By the time the authorities arrived, fighting had been under way for an hour. Sheriff Morton McMichael and his officers were able to reestablish control, but McMichael knew the situation was volatile. As darkness fell, the peace remained uneasy, and the neighborhood was bathed in an eerie glow from bonfires some children had started.

Sensing further trouble, McMichael asked for support from the state militia, but General George Cadwalader, the local militia commander, refused - a serious mistake. Around 10:00 that night a Protestant mob marched up Cadwalader Street and, according to a report in the Philadelphia Ledger, "commenced breaking into the houses on both sides of the street, destroying the furniture, demolishing the windows, and rendering the houses completely uninhabitable." Many Catholics fled as their houses were destroyed.

The mob marched on to a nearby seminary owned by a Catholic order of nuns, the Sisters of Charity. The nuns had moved their order to Iowa some time before the riots, and the building was vacant except for a housekeeper, Mrs. Baker.

As the mob surrounded the building, Baker opened the door and implored them to leave. She was hit in the face with a stone. Some Catholics who had been posted as guards outside a nearby church fired a volley of buckshot into the crowd. John Wright, identified in press reports as an "innocent bystander," fell dead. Nathan Ramsey received a serious wound and died one month later.

The Protestant crowd dispersed. Sporadic gunfire was heard throughout the night, though the rioting had ceased.

That evening ARP officials circulated a flyer offering a \$1,000 reward for Schiffler's killers. The party also

called a general meeting for Tuesday afternoon at Independence Hall. At the insistence of the Rev. John H. Gihon, the words "Let Every Man Come Prepared to Defend Himself" were added to posters advertising the event.

Tuesday morning the Native American, the most extreme of the anti-Catholic newspapers, proclaimed, "Another St. Bartholomew's Day has begun in the streets of Philadelphia," comparing the events of the previous day to the mass slaughter of Huguenots in 1572 by Catholics in France. "The bloody hand of the pope," it continued, "has stretched forth to our destruction. Now we call on our fellow citizens, who regard free institutions, whether they be native or adopted, to arm. Our liberties are now to be fought for - let us not be slack in our preparations."

By 3:30 a crowd of at least 3,000 had gathered for the ARP rally. The first speaker was Thomas R. Newbold, publisher of the less rabid Nativist organ the North American. Newbold called for nonviolence, but his words were soon forgotten when the next speaker, attorney Charles J. Jack, unleashed an emotionally charged tirade that whipped the crowd into a frenzy. They soon began chanting, "Let's go to Kensington!"

Jack led the march. Behind him a man carried a tattered U.S. flag that had been damaged during the previous night's disturbance. Attached to it was a banner reading, "This is the FLAG that was trampled UNDERFOOT by the IRISH PAPISTS."

Many Kensington Catholics, warned of the mob, had abandoned their homes, but some armed Irishmen were holed up inside others. As the Protestants entered the neighborhood, they swarmed the Hibernia Hose House, a volunteer fire brigade and Irish meeting place. Catholics opened fire; Protestants shot back.

Four Protestants fell dead; at least 11 were wounded. In an effort to force the Catholic gunmen out into the streets, Protestants began setting fire to houses. The wooden frame structures went up like dry brush.

One Catholic was killed. Joseph Rice, described as a bystander, was hit by a bullet fired by 17-year-old Isaac Hare. He died instantly.

The new outbreak of violence convinced Gen. Cadwalader to call out the state militia. His troops arrived and stopped the shooting as fire companies began battling the blazes. The militia managed to keep the peace for the rest of the day. But the next morning, Wednesday, May 8, trouble erupted anew. Despite the presence of militia troops, gangs of Protestants were roaming Kensington by 10:00 a.m. They set fire to several houses along Cadwalader Street and also torched a Catholic-owned carpet-weaving shop.

The mob then moved on to St. Michael's Catholic Church. The rector, Michael Donohoe, had been outspoken against Protestant religious exercises in public schools and knew that his life was in danger. He got out of town once the rioting started, leaving the church keys in the hands of a militia commander.

A small band of militia was guarding the church. The Protestants set fires nearby to draw them away and then broke into St. Michael's, destroying the rectory, tossing Donohoe's library out into the street, and immolating the building. A fire company arrived, but the mob kept it away. When the steeple collapsed, they cheered. The fire swept to five nearby houses and destroyed them as well.

The mob then moved on to the Sisters of Charity Seminary and burned it to the ground. For good measure they sacked and looted a nearby Catholic-owned grocery store.

Meanwhile a second mob had gathered at St. Augustine's Catholic Church at Fourth and Vine streets. Kensington mayor John M. Scott and some neighborhood residents were guarding the church. Scott mounted the church steps and implored the crowd to go home. He was hit in the chest with a rock. With Scott out of the way, the mob stormed the church and burned it. Again the crowd held back firefighters and cheered as the steeple collapsed.

Militia troops struggled to regain control. As the rioting spread closer to Philadelphia proper, the town's leading citizens demanded tougher action. State officials announced that the militia would begin to use deadly force to clear the streets.

The threat worked. Kensington was briefly put under martial law, and the disturbances soon ended. Thousands attended a peace rally Thursday morning. Bishop Kenrick suspended worship on Sunday, May 12, but the day passed without incident.

The Kensington riots were over. Final tally: seven dead on site with two more to die later, and at least 20 wounded. Property damage totaled \$250,000, big money in the 1840's.

While Kensington remained peaceful, rioting broke out again in south Philadelphia in early July, when rumors spread that Catholics were stockpiling weapons at a church in Southwark. Once again rioters clashed with the militia. During three days of disturbances 10 were killed and at least 20 wounded.

Catholics received the blame. Not long after the riots a grand jury was convened to study the matter. The jury, stacked with nativists, declared that the riots were caused by the "efforts of a portion of the community to exclude the Bible from our public schools" and blamed hotheaded Irish for disrupting ARP meetings.

Philadelphia was not the only city plagued by Catholic-Protestant strife during this period, although no other city had such violence. Reaction to the riots reverberated elsewhere. In New York City, nativists got wind of the Philadelphia riots and began clamoring for revenge, calling a mass rally for May 9. Alarmed, Catholic bishop John Hughes posted gangs of armed guards at New York's Catholic churches. Hughes also implored city officials to persuade New York nativists to cancel the rally. They did, and no churches were damaged in New York.

But perhaps the strangest reaction occurred in St. Louis. Word of the riots reached the city accompanied by a rumor that the Inquisition had been reestablished at a local Jesuit-run medical school. Visitors to the school had apparently spotted corpses used for dissection lessons and had jumped to the grisly conclusion that they were the Inquisition's first victims. A mob surrounded the school, but an armed force of Irish drove them off.

Interestingly enough, the Irish Catholics eventually got what they wanted - though it took more than a century. In 1963 the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the practice of opening the public school day with Bible reading "without comment." The case, *Abington Township School District v. Schempp*, was brought not by Catholics, but by a suburban Philadelphia Unitarian family, Ed and Sydney Schempp, on behalf of their 16-year-old son, Ellory. By 1963, however, many Catholics, fed up with forced Protestantism in public schools, had long ago left the system for parochial schools.

Of course, religion in public schools remains as contentious today as in the 1840's, and though people aren't battling each other on the streets over the controversy, at least not yet, the same principles that incited the Philadelphia riots exist in the current debate.

What lesson, then, can the nation learn from the violence?

First, religion is taken so seriously that when people believe that their religious rights are being violated, they are capable of responding in ways that shock.

Second, despite the claims that state-sponsored religion in public schools would be a unifying factor, history shows that it is a divisive one that quickly causes people to take sides.

Third, state-promoted religion can become a club that the majority uses against an unpopular minority as a reminder of their "second-class" status, as the Protestants in Philadelphia clearly were trying to do to Catholics.

Finally, the Bible riots show that mandatory religious exercises have no place in public schools, which are expected to serve children from all different religious backgrounds.

No monument, of course, commemorates young George Schiffler, the hapless leather worker who was the first to die in the Bible riots. Yet the issue that left him dead on the streets is just as real now as when, more than a century ago, Christians were killing each other over religion in public schools.